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U.S. Wants Changes In U.N. Agreement

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UNITED NATIONS, Aug. 24 -- Less than a month before world leaders arrive in New York for a world summit on poverty and U.N. reform, the Bush administration has thrown the proceedings in turmoil with a call for drastic renegotiation of a draft agreement to be signed by presidents and prime ministers attending the event.

The United States has only recently introduced more than 750 amendments that would eliminate new pledges of foreign aid to impoverished nations, scrap provisions that call for action to halt climate change and urge nuclear powers to make greater progress in dismantling their nuclear arms. At the same time, the administration is urging members of the United Nations to strengthen language in the 29-page document that would underscore the importance of taking tougher action against terrorism, promoting human rights and democracy, and halting the spread of the world's deadliest weapons.

Next month's summit, an unusual meeting at the United Nations of heads of state, was called by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan to reinvigorate efforts to fight poverty and to take stronger steps in the battles against terrorism and genocide. The leaders of 175 nations are expected to attend and sign the agreement, which has been under negotiation for six months.

But Annan's effort to press for changes has been hampered by investigations into fraud in the U.N. oil-for-food program and revelations of sexual misconduct by U.N. peacekeepers.

The United Nations originally scheduled the Sept. 14 summit as a follow-up to the 2000 Millennium Summit, which produced commitments by U.N. members to meet deadlines over the next 15 years aimed at reducing poverty, preventable diseases and other scourges of the world's poor. But the Bush administration is seeking to focus attention on the need to streamline U.N. bureaucracy, establish a democracy fund, strengthen the U.N. human rights office and support a U.S. initiative to halt the trade in weapons of mass destruction.

The U.S. amendments call for striking any mention of the Millennium Development Goals, and the administration has publicly complained that the document's section on poverty is too long. Instead, the United States has sought to underscore the importance of the Monterrey Consensus, a 2002 summit in Mexico that focused on free-market reforms, and required governments to improve accountability in exchange for aid and debt relief.

The proposed U.S. amendments, contained in a confidential 36-page document obtained by The Washington Post, have been presented this week to select envoys. The U.N. General Assembly's president, Jean Ping of Gabon, is organizing a core group of 20 to 30 countries, including the United States and other major powers, to engage in an intensive final round of negotiations in an attempt to strike a deal.

"Now it is maybe time to go on some key issues where we still have controversies and negotiate on these key issues," he said Tuesday.

The proposed changes, submitted by U.S. Ambassador John R. Bolton, touch on virtually every aspect of U.N. affairs and provide a detailed look at U.S. concerns about the world body's future. They underscore U.S. efforts to impose greater oversight of U.N. spending and to eliminate any reference to the International Criminal Court. The administration also opposes language that urges the five permanent members of the Security Council not to cast vetoes to block action to halt genocide, war crimes or ethnic cleansing.

Russia, Pakistan and several other developing countries have also introduced plans for changes in the power of some U.N. bodies.

Bolton and a spokesman did not respond to requests to comment Wednesday.

Some delegates were sympathetic with the approach taken by Bolton, who took over as ambassador this month. "I think he just wants to be very cautious," said Canada's U.N. ambassador, Allan Rock. "He's coming into a situation where there's a [29]-page document on the table, and I think he's looking at it very closely and he's concerned that great care be taken before his country's name is put to it, and that's quite natural."

But the proposals face strong resistance from poorer countries, which want the United Nations to focus

more on alleviating poverty, criticizing U.S. and Israeli military policies in the Middle East, and scaling back its propensity to intervene in small countries that abuse human rights.

"We are looking at very, very difficult negotiations in the days ahead," said Munir Akram, Pakistan's U.N. ambassador. The United States has "strong positions, and many of us do have very strongly held positions. That's the nature of the game. My only regret is we didn't get into the negotiations early enough."

U.S. and U.N. diplomats say that Bolton has indicated in face-to-face meetings with foreign delegates that he is prepared to pursue other negotiating options if the current process proves cumbersome.

For example, he has suggested that the entire document could be scrapped and replaced with a brief statement. He also has indicated that the document could be split up by themes, and that nations could choose the ones to support, the diplomats said.

In meetings with foreign delegates, Bolton has expressed concern about a provision of the agreement that urges wealthy countries, including the United States, to contribute 0.7 percent of their gross national product in assistance to poor countries. He has also objected to language that urges nations to observe a moratorium on nuclear testing and to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which the Bush administration opposes.

"There seems to be general agreement that we must now undertake the more difficult process of open and transparent negotiations to reach agreement on those issues," Bolton wrote Wednesday in a confidential letter to U.N. envoys. "Time is short. In order to maximize our chances of success, I suggest we begin the negotiations immediately, this week if possible."

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